

Communications

## EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON MALES AND ALIENATED MASCULINITIES

Juan Guillermo Figueroa Perea, PhD

Colegio de México

[jfigue@colmex.mx](mailto:jfigue@colmex.mx)

### ABSTRACT

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ESSAY IS TO REFLECT ON SOME OF THE THEORETICAL, ANALYTICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF DIFFERENT PROCESSES OF CLASSIFICATION OF THE CATEGORIES OF BEING A MAN. IT IS ALSO A PURPOSE TO PRESENT THESE REFLECTIONS AS A PROPOSAL THAT STRUCTURES SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS, AS WELL AS THE ASSUMPTIONS THAT SUPPORT THE CONSTRUCT OF INFORMATION PRODUCTION, INCLUDING THE ASSESSMENT OF EXISTING INFORMATION FROM OTHER STUDIES THAT DO NOT SPECIFICALLY ALLUDE TO MALES AS A POPULATION. IN ORDER TO DEFINE MY THEORETICAL, POLITICAL AND EXISTENTIAL POSITION, I HAVE USED SUCH CONCEPTS AS ALIENATION AND PROPERTY OVER THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION IN WHAT IS CALLED "MASCULINITY." FINALLY, A PROPOSAL IS OFFERED FOR THE DE-ALIENATION AND RE-APPROPRIATION OF THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION BY THE RESPECTIVE ENTITIES AS HUMAN BEINGS.

KEY WORDS: MALES, MASCULINITY, ALIENATION, TYPOLOGIES, BEING A MAN

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to reflect on some of the theoretical, analytical and political dimensions of different processes of classification of the categories of being a man. It is also a purpose to present these reflections as a proposal that structures some research findings, as well as the assumptions that support the construct of information production, including the assessment of the existing information from other studies that do not specifically allude to males as a population. In order to define my theoretical, political and existential position, I have used such concepts as alienation and property over the means of production in what is

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called "masculinity." Finally, a proposal is offered for the de-alienation and re-appropriation of the means of production by the respective entities as human beings.

#### 1. BUILDING A CONTEXT: STAGE 1

A series of reflections written by me at the end of the 1990's (1) constitute relevant backgrounds to this paper. At that time, I proposed a first typology for the organization of the image of men held by scholars who studied them in the so-called masculinity and male studies or in various areas of knowledge. I identified five categories that covered two major groups; i.e., three Manichaeic categories that are constantly applying the concepts of victim and victimizer, and two categories that reconstruct different arrangements and rules, as well as the role of multiple social actors, including males and women as relevant players that are not simply designated under a biological subdivision; instead, they represent a central component of gender specializations that generate benefits and disadvantages for both. In addition, their decisions are questioned in light of the possibility to either reproduce or reject or even try to potentially change their lessons learnt. Each category in the second classification may give rise to mutually contradictory political reactions, despite certain epistemological and methodological consistencies among them. For this reason, I chose to offer a detailed assessment in section 3 herein, where certain specific matters were found to merit a discussion at this point.

In the five aforementioned categories, a vision of men as victimizers is first presented. A study is conducted in order to understand why men are the way they are, but already classified in their image of unilateral exercisers of power. Since men perpetrate "questionable" acts, most of the time the position to try to explain this particular aspect is to oversimplify the context and somehow minimize the capacity held by women—as the other social player that interacts with men—to react, negotiate and exercise power.

In my review of studies about males, I have found a second vision of men as victimizers of their own peers, but even alluding to a gender perspective. In other words, men are not the way they are simply because they want to, but because they have learned to be like this. In fact, some women blame themselves for their belief that men's actions were attributed to their preference, rather than their learning. In this approach, some tend to treat men with indulgence, and by so acting, they forget Jean-Paul Sartre, who noted that "while we are not

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responsible for what we have learned to be, we are indeed responsible for what we do with what we have learned to be" (2).

In a third vision, men are presented in self-flagellation and self-blame. Emphasis is made on the need for men to recognize themselves as violent, authoritarian and discriminatory; hence, they owe such a huge debt to women that they carry this issue to the field of rights. Some have even claimed that "a man who speaks of men's rights is certainly antifeminist." In other words, it appears that their only conclusion is built on the rationale of self-blame and repayment of past debts; and as such, now they deny their own rights, so that women may emerge, as if those rights did not apply to every person in the first place. I regard these three visions as Manichaeic and unable to contribute much to changes in day-to-day practices.

The fourth vision reintroduces gender-perspective elements and recognizes the structural complexity of any social process. In this case, men's behaviors are assessed from the perspective of an extremely complex day-to-day practice. In other words, violence may be studied in relation to gender perspective, hegemonic masculinity and other possible social relations that are recognized as necessary to try to interpret this social issue. This globalizing interpretation may eventually paralyze its proponent. By recognizing that reality is so complex that a finite (time-limited) person may feel there isn't much he can do to change it, other than confirm its complexity, such a proponent may adopt quite a cynical stance, 'what can I do about this? I thought it could change! It is so complex that I better adapt to it.' Some people adopt reactionary positions that are based on their comfort with the existing system of social relations, even if they understand the rationale underlining its operation.

The fifth vision is somehow similar to the foregoing view; however, it is more modest and seeks to protect both the context and the processing capacity of its researchers and social advocates in light of the existing knowledge. While reality continues to be recognized as complex, the fifth vision tries to analyze and decode this reality, as broken down in its components. In its process, this vision recognizes the nature of its analytical and theoretical limitations and engages in confrontation and dialogue with other limitations and approaches. This partial reconstruction from within and without also helps plan, promote and foretell certain changes. Human beings need to see results that can nurture a sense of optimism in

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our interaction with and reconstruction of reality. I believe that this fifth vision is closer to a gender perspective.

## 2. REBUILDING THE CONTEXT: STAGE 2

Five years later, I reviewed the aforementioned proposition (3) by asking a number of questions of the existing literature. The five categories discussed above are neither exhaustive nor fully mutually exclusive; however, they vary according to the subject matter of their individual investigations.

These are the first questions I proposed to analyze: What aspects are the subject of research on a timeline basis? Why some topics are more recurrent in researches about males and why other topics are merely emerging? Some authors have found that much research has been conducted on male sexuality, health and violence, while the research projects on reproduction, labor, sports, use of time, political participation, emotional life and the dimension of music in the male experience are much more recent. Therefore, a first question to consider is, why are topics studied in different periods and what topics are not being researched? Is there an intention to address these topics more directly or immediately? In fact, sometimes financial resources to implement intervention programs are available, but maybe the immediacy of the practices targeted for intervention is such that prevents any theoretical development about the subjects of analysis. Notwithstanding, in light of the desire to produce results immediately and within the short term, certain topics that depict inequalities and reprehensible practices in the areas of sexuality, health and violence are given priority.

The second question I suggested was, ¿how are the different topics studied? It is not enough to identify the topics that are being studied. It is also important to understand how they are studied and the way in which the males discussed in those studies are portrayed. Many texts consistently make reference to males; however, no reference is made to women. In other cases, reference is made to both males and females but only to compare their behaviors. Some authors have even claimed that any study about one of these population groups will implicitly generate much information about the other group, provided that the study is built on a gender perspective.

My third question was aimed at decoding what images of men are held when researching on topics where men are viewed in their different contexts? This question sought to address in

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detail the components of the typology summarized in section 2 herein by discussing the various phases of the construction of the problem studied and identifying categories to generate information to confirm, verify or distort (as Popper would) the existing assumptions. The information would later be organized in order to build and develop a data analysis.

To organize the knowledge obtained from the studies about males I suggested a fourth question: is masculinity the subject and if so, how is it addressed? In other words, is masculinity defined inductively or deductively? Are the studies based on what males do in an attempt to establish differences with women and the origin of such differences, or a definition of masculinity is assumed, and deductively confirmed in practice? My aim here was to explain whether masculinity is interpreted as a condition, an essence, a characteristic or a privilege.

The fifth question proposed to assess the matters suggested for further researching the different areas of research about this population group. In other words, what suggestions are being made for future work in this area? The dimension of power in its various forms is one of the obvious characteristics of many studies. It is not only a matter of confirming the power but inquire as well about the way specific men process the exercise of power, how they reproduce the exercise of power and how they may even infringe it. In this regard, the following questions are relevant: How is reality viewed theoretically and methodologically? How is it processed by social actors? How can gender inequalities, as an axiological position, be changed? How can alternative masculinity models be designed, even if in time-based terms?

The sixth question sought to identify and confirm whether or not reality was being renamed in any process of investigation about males; i.e., whether terms and words were being coined as part of these investigations in order to discover or reveal other forms or relation in the interaction between genders. According to linguistics, the realities that are hardly mentioned are eventually deemed as inexistent, and in this respect, the question tried to explore for new linguistic references, and in the existential, theoretical and political backgrounds, embark on a search that helped deconstruct what has been learned about genders and identify processes of adaption to, resistance against and transgression of the rules that have pervaded the different identities of both males and women, and through that process, their interaction modalities. In fact, I suggested that, rather than speaking of

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masculinity studies, reference should be made to “studies about males and power relations between genders.”

Another angle of my review of the existing literature and researchers, addressed the sort of research questions that represent the baseline for studies about the male population. Those questions may range from unilateral attempts to act upon and modify behaviors up to more regular processes designed to explore behaviors from a historical standpoint and trace back the multiple causes of their modalities. This last point may be addressed from a gender perspective that is applied to both males and women or from an interpretation that vindicates solely the “women’s cause,” or conversely, an interpretation that tries to identify the obstacles to “male interests.” The above requires that consideration be given to the need, or lack thereof, to establish “studies about masculinity,” about “males and gender relations,” as distinct field, or define such exercises as part of gender investigations.

### 3. REVISITING: STAGE 3

These new reflections that are added to my personal research project are organized into four facets that are present in typologies defined for the study of male population members and their different behaviors. I am talking about the meaning of “being a man” as a practice, object of study and political category, to refer finally to the meaning of “the generic being,” studying that “being a man.” Finally, some theoretical and political propositions are offered as a way to encourage a process of de-alienation of gender identities, particularly in the case of males.

#### 3.1. The meaning of “being a man” as a practice

My first analytical proposition is designed to structure research findings. It seeks to understand the way in which the origin of what makes us become men (biological differences, learned practices, embraced discourses or interjected privileges) is interpreted in research processes. I propose that this question be addressed from the perspective enunciated by Simone de Beauvoir (by not being born a man, but becoming and evolving as one) (4), while taking also into account the views held by Jean-Paul Sartre about taking responsibility for our freedoms, even if we accept that we are under the influence of and conditioned by processes of socialization (2).

I then propose addressing the questions about the existence or inexistence of “masculinity” (5) to show the difference between the use of this term as a tautological category in studies

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of male reproductive behavior or as a political category that requires males to adopt existential positions about "the state of affairs in gender relations." The gender perspective helps illustrate and decode the exclusive and hierarchical specialization processes between extreme types of men and women (6). Likewise, the breakdown of power-domination relations (7) enables the identification of their underpinning social mechanisms, which could also contribute to design strategies in order to change these relations. In this context of reinterpretation of the studies about "being a man" in practice, it is important that the notion of gender identity in relational terms, as suggested by Connell (8), be revisited to explain the different behaviors that are the subject of studies among male populations.

In this deconstruction of our epistemological legacies, as coined by Alejandro Cervantes (9), the review of the linguistic resources used in studies about males and masculinity is a particularly relevant tool that helps identify the assumptions that support the designation and structure of reality. This tool can also help identify the issues that are being silenced and the reasons why: is this silence the result of complicity, fear or linguistic insufficiency?

### 3.2. The meaning of "being a man" as an object of study

My second analytical proposition in this new reflection seeks to recover those research findings in different domains that could be used to challenge previous typologies developed in the course of studies about men. These may include the categories of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinity, as well as the categories of dominant and subordinated masculinities (10). Such an exercise will help document at least two contrasting categories of males subject to study: a positivist and Manichaeian perspective of men as victimizers, violent and dominant, and a gender perspective that allows for a historical reconstruction of male behaviors and the "participating social actors" that implement, reproduce, question and/or change those behaviors.

Since these binary divisions have many subcomponents, the literature may be organized by assessing the theoretical, analytical and political relevance of various sets of attributes that have been identified in the course of trying to explain the day-to-day routine of different groups of men. Some authors view men as being providers, courageous and controllers of women and other persons (11), or as being providers, competitive, bellicose, heroes and impregnators, among other characteristics. Some texts list both positive and negative indicators of "masculinity" by allocating ranges to different traits that may be recognized in

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day-to-day behaviors (12), such as males' capacity to provide, their sex practices, their relation with their partner and children, their participation in household chores, their emotional bonds, their use of violence, their pursuit of risks, their conduct in public spaces and their exercise of power.

In the light of these assessments, one may even question whether violence is a mere attribute since it is allocated in varying degrees to males or a category applied in parallel to any human being (men included) and therefore analyze the environment that drives the experience of being (physically, sexually, emotionally, mentally or economically) violent men or not, a possibility that is often ruled out in some studies on the assumption that, given their life in a patriarchal society, men are violent to the extent that their biological definition gives them patriarchal benefits. Some authors would oppose this conclusion and would demand a political definition of the individual regarding his position within gender relations.

### 3.3. The meaning of "being a man" as a political category

My third political proposition is offered for collective discussion. It seeks to reflect on the existing theoretical classifications of male behaviors and masculinities. These classifications are not always accompanied by an explicit social movement and/or the sort of recognized male interaction with feminist movements, in which women are seen as organized for the construction of a gender perspective. Designed to structure research findings for their comparison with explicit political positions, this exercise may help understand the stances that deny men the possibility of being feminist, simply because they are men (at feminist conferences), unlike other interpretations that refer to men as "promoters of feminism" (13), as pro-feminists (14) or as feminist males, by affinity with a political choice (15). The existing data help reveal and assess the origins of «new exercises» of masculinity from different angles: advocating for feminist demands, increasingly wider dissemination of sons' and daughters' rights and needs, women's growing participation in the labor market, the obvious gender conflicts and the larger number of males who have become convinced of the need to "reinvent their parameters for relation with women and their fellow males."

Some classifications of men's movements and other classifications proposed by scholars of male populations, such as the mythical poets who advocate for Men's Rights—a proposition closely akin to "masculine fundamentalism"—and those who could be described as anti-sexist males or pro-feminists, among other categories, may be another benchmark for comparison

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and discussion. The positions adopted explicitly or otherwise in respect of feminism; that is, in favor of, and ambivalent or contrary to this theoretical-political proposition, may be another area for discussion in the context of organizing these studies.

Another analytical angle for assessing the political meanings of the "being a man" category seeks to review existing studies and research findings in an effort to identify the explicit and implicit origins of "new exercises of masculinity" in general, as well as paternity, as one of the paradigmatic areas of study on this category.

Our feminist sisters in particular have argued the inexistence of a clear political agenda in support of the studies about men. It has also been noted that such an agenda is kept hidden and may be easily manipulated. For this reason, it is hereby proposed that the following aspects be pondered, as forms of interpretation of the genealogy of the existing researches: the response, which is sometimes given by force, to feminist demands; the reaction to or consideration of the rights of the under-aged; the social and family re-adjustment resulting from women's growing participation in the labor market; the increasingly obvious nature of the gender conflicts; and as an additional relevant benchmark, the males' experience with their "reinvention of their gender learning" as arising from their feelings, practices and, at times, realization of the positive and negative consequences of their respective gender learning, including the assessment of the personal histories of those who conduct research on this population.

#### 3.4. The meaning of the "generic being" studying that "being a man"

My fourth and last proposal seeks to structure some of the criticisms I have heard about in respect of studies on males and masculinities, as well as criticisms of the positions held by us their researchers. I have identified the following criticisms: shallow assessment of power, lack of social foundations, possible boycott of the feminist movements, use of arguments in support of groups opposed to women's rights, self-complacent discourse about being a man, and in particular, the "oblivion" of male homosexuals as a distinct group (16).

The organization of the data, political constructions and theoretical and political assumptions supplied by existing studies will help clarify and specify those questions. This section will assess recent propositions that seek a review of our knowledge production processes, on the understanding that we recognize ourselves as "situated researchers" (17), with interjected gender conditionings that explain the referential language we apply to designate and

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structure the day-to-day realities. As a result, our object of study will be designated as the same process of demarcation of our research agenda that is addressed in section 2 herein; in other words, what is being researched? How is it being researched? Is the reflection about males and masculinities inductive or deductive? What are the new terms applied to explain the reality being researched? And finally, what is being proposed for continued research in the areas targeted for these analyses?

As noted by Benedito Medrado and Jorge Lyra, from the Papai Institute in Brazil, these questions do not have a single answer; instead, they may act as filters for a steady interlocution with the reviews of the knowledge that has been produced about male populations, as well as the knowledge that needs to be produced (18). These authors allude to the need to build a feminist matrix in the studies about men and masculinity by interpreting the feminist studies from a gender perspective and questioning the agendas for both intervention and male-population studies, while designing their associated public policies. An analogous gender interpretation may be suggested as studies of men and power relations between genders.

#### 4. RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT ALIENATION AND ALIENATED MASCULINITIES

I am of the idea that seeking theoretical, analytical and political resources in order to take a distance from the manner in which “being a man and the construction of masculinities” are studied will help take hold of new means of production that reduce the alienation existing in different models of gender identity from the male experience, but not in global terms, but possibly with more modest propositions in specific day-to-day areas.

In my opinion, it is relevant to continue to identify theoretical, political, analytical and methodological strategies that help structure the categories being used in the construction of any object of study inclusive of the male population; in particular, the strategies that may explain the unequal exercise of power between males and women, as well as the double standards that underpin the rules applicable to males and females. However, it is necessary to diversify the horizon in order to address the ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions that are often mentioned in the process of being a man, and to add meanings to the increasingly frequent category of masculinity crisis.

An existing approach looks at the privileges males reproduce without criticism on the assumption that their behaviors are not likely to cause adverse side effects (or

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disadvantages). Another approach alludes to males' needs that are apparently met by resorting to certain symbolic referents built by society as part of gender specialization, of which both males and women are also a consequence, and for whose reproduction we share responsibility. It is feasible that we are implementing referents either unconsciously, as noted by Bonino (19), or fully aware of their resulting "gender benefits." However, the manner in which males explain, identify, interject, interpret the existence of, and if at all, take distance from these dimensions, has been the subject of less research (16).

The rights represent another analytical term of reference that has been gaining legitimacy. They may be interpreted as a prerogative vested in humans (whose gender differences and inequalities may not be felt or for which humans may not want to be held co-responsible) or inherent to males. At this level, I perceive some confusion between rights and privileges. It is believed that if women had the same privileges as males, progress would be made toward equality, or at least, the existing inequality would be reduced. Notwithstanding, it is often ignored that many "gender privileges" have been legitimized by actually denying women's rights; therefore, rather than seeking to be at par on privileges, I think it will be more attractive and relevant to democratize the space for negotiations, by making sure that negotiations are more symmetric and seek fairness. By the same token, based on the findings from studies of various male groups, I have been working on proposals to reconstruct the experiences and interpretations of the differences between rights and privileges in gender relations. The problem is that, more often than not, this distinction is made subsequent to the study and is not present from its design.

The category of discomfort as a personal experience and as baseline for the introjection of needs, and potentially, rights, is another angle. In some situations, the abuse of power results in adverse consequences for the abuser, and not only the sufferer. However, a shallow or Manichaeian interpretation of the interaction may lead to believe that the victimizer is only profiting from an unequal exchange, thus ignoring the contradiction, ambivalence and adverse effects of those behaviors for that person in terms of losses, frustrations or an inability to feel personal realization unless his fellow individuals are humiliated. There are situations where the abuser of power recognizes his discomfort and distress with his experience; however, these feelings are minimized by a negative assessment of his overall conduct; therefore, the opportunity to re-define the inequalities in gender relations is missed, thus encouraging

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processes of change from the interjected discomfort, and even more so, from the discomfort felt by the closest persons.

The questions and uncertainties that are present in studies about males, as well as in the experiences associated with the process of being a man represent another dimension that merits a discussion as part of the logics of the means of production held by gender identities. The personal and social histories can define and condition expectations, bias and evaluative assumptions that are not always easy to reveal in light of the existing reluctance to explain them.

#### 5. RETHINKING THE RIGHTS, NEEDS, PRIVILEGES AND DISCOMFORTS

As a matter of preliminary conclusion, it is pertinent to insist on the need to demarcate the preferred analytical angles and epistemological approaches applied to the reconstruction of our objects of study pertaining to men and the power relations between genders (16).

The differences perceived by males and women as regards the behaviors that are expected and desired from, and proposed for males and women in each area of human intervention constitute one major trait worthy of discussion. The interpretation of the information that is generated also requires an inquiry of the reasons (as ideas and beliefs) people argue to account for the differences described for men and women; in other words, an understanding of the rational, intuitive or other justifications that are verbalized in an effort to reconstruct these differences.

In order to explain the differences between men and women, one can assume at least three hypotheses. Firstly, these distinctions may be viewed as natural differences built on and arising from biological differences that are consequently hard to question. Secondly, they may be viewed from the perspective of the privileges of being born with a sex that holds a certain social position, or conversely, the disadvantage of being born and living in a situation of disadvantage, and in this respect, the position of employer versus employee may serve as analogy: rather than being determined from a biological standpoint, the difference is being largely conditioned by the fact they were born and have lived as such. Thirdly and finally, the differences may be identified on the basis of an unequal exercise of rights, as derived from the history of social relations, which people do not feel responsible for, but a consequence of, and in respect of which, quite different perceptions may be held on the assumption that it

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has always been like that or the assumption of authority and capacity to influence their change in view of their result from social interaction.

Researching the possibilities for questioning and negotiating the people's perception of the origin of these differences will be a second step in which individuals will be confronted with a discourse that is either explicit or precludes any possibility to reduce or work on these differences in the pursuit of fairer situations. If the differences are biological, then a change may be seen as quite complex or apparently impossible: at best, the change may be perceived as a generous gesture by someone who lives in a more favorable situation. In the case of the privileges, being born to a position of inequality may be viewed as injustice and the person who lives in a privileged situation may be viewed as the enemy that might give up some of his privileges as a means to maintain his overall status, but he may not eliminate his strategies for domination, control and subjugation.

In the last case, the negotiation would be quite different for the following reasons: (a) one may explicitly recognize the social difficulty of changing the unequal exercise of rights, but at least, processes of intention and proposition could be launched in an effort to re-accommodate them, and, at best, attain the most possible fairness; (b) it may be a product of alienation in which privileges and biological differences are mixed up together as an explanation for the unequal exercise of rights; and in this instance, it will be necessary to raise awareness about the fact that the inequality is not natural and may be an object of possible social, individual or group intervention; c) there may be the fear of ignoring other possibilities of social interaction which, combined ambivalently with beliefs and assumptions derived from the experience of inequality, are beyond the ideas allusive to equality.

The above is highly influenced by both males' and women's perception of their entitlement to rights and their capacity to question institutionally and socially legitimized authorities, but also their responsibility to monitor, oversee and evaluate the social relations of which they are part. In this respect, it is worth considering whether individuals of both sexes question the rules in silence, in couple (clandestinely) or as groups, to confront the authorities and amend the standards. In other words, in my view, it is critical that resources are identified to figure out the meaning of "masculine silence" by drawing distinctions among the individual level, the academia and the public policies. In the first case, as discussed above, one can assume reasons associated with complicity or fear, but also a lack of epistemological resources. In the second case, the choice of men as subjects and objects of study has been

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poorly legitimized, maybe because of the gender conditioning of their researchers, but also because of a lack of epistemological resources for implementation. Finally, in this new reading of the existing literature, the silence from the public policies may possibly be construed as doubt over the relevance of working with the population, which is the term of reference in many studies, either because of conscious or unconscious interest in maintaining the system of power relations in social interactions.

In closing, I offer a small philosophical point for collective discussion. I am of the idea that critically reading and revisiting the research reports that cover members of the male population may help clarify a notion I have developed as "being for oneself, in spite of oneself or in spite of the fellow selves." In this manner, we may embark on a process of redefinition that accompanies the person who "gains awareness of himself" by successfully relating to and recognizing his fellow humans and himself. This will permit to promote the concept of I and the other I; in other words, "my male self as the other self" (20). In my opinion, when that time comes, we will begin to re-appropriate the means of production to construct and reconstruct our identities as human beings, beyond any gender specialization.

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